

Celebrities in the Internet Age: Han Han's Everyman Appeal
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Teaching the writings of Han Han and Ai Weiwei this quarter to a class of thirty-something undergraduates, the majority of whom had grown up in mainland China or Taiwan, was at once a revealing and bewildering experience for me. Our liveliest discussion of the quarter took place when we read Han Han's debut novel *Triple Door* (San chong men 三重門), the novel that made Han Han famous as a seventeen-year-old rebel in 2000. My students opened up enthusiastically, sharing their own similar experiences with the oppressive educational system in China, and attesting to how true Han Han's narrative rang for them. The following class, when I lectured on a selection of Han Han's blogs, including his criticism of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and his essays on democracy and revolution, they frustratingly fell silent. But if reception of Han Han's work ranged between complete adoration and reluctant acceptance for my students, Ai Weiwei was a completely polarizing figure. After reading a few of his blog entries and watching the documentary *Never Sorry*, they either viewed him as a courageous hero, concerned about the future and welfare of China and its people, or as a disrespectful troublemaker, intent on 惟恐天下不亂 (this was the favorite phrase used by my students). I was also deeply impressed by two things: how many times they used the word "realistic" to describe Han Han's writing, and how quickly they discounted Ai Weiwei's conceptual art as utterly pointless.

This paper looks at the relationship between two of the most controversial bloggers to emerge from China: the pop culture icon and writer Han Han and the artist-activist Ai Weiwei. Both men are representative of a moment that uses newly available platforms to redefine the relationship between the masses, the celebrity-intellectual, and the state. As a result of modern technology, in particular the use of inexpensive but widely disseminated platforms such as blogs,

much of the power that has customarily been situated in the masses has shifted away from large, physically present groups to anonymous fandoms dedicated to individual celebrity personalities. There are no better examples of this new form of mass sway than the two internet celebrities Ai Weiwei and Han Han. As spokesmen that have increasingly gained exposure in non-Chinese media outlets—both writers’ blogs have recently been translated into English-language edited volumes (MIT Press, 2011; and Simon & Schuster, 2012)—they find themselves occupying a unique position in relationship to the crowd they are supposed to represent. However, each man’s approach to attracting attention is different; Han Han’s populist approach has made him a voice for the people, and as such has shielded him from the government persecution that has plagued Ai Weiwei. While Han Han’s “everyman” appeal has prevented him from receiving the same level of critical acclaim achieved by Ai Weiwei, my paper shows how this trait is actually Han Han’s greatest asset. I examine Han Han’s remarkable ability to transform the political into the mundane, and his connections to consumer culture.

Modern Renaissance Men

It may appear misguided to compare Han Han to Ai Weiwei, as doing so runs the risk of obscuring “important differences in their audiences and their tactics” (Osnos 2011: 59). First, Ai Weiwei is foremost by profession a conceptual artist, then a political dissident (a term he dislikes). Born in 1957, the same year as the first Anti-Rightist campaign that led to his family being sent down and the labeling of his famous poet father Ai Qing as a class enemy, Ai Weiwei is inextricable from his myth-like past. His role as an activist is tied to his provocative tactics as an artist: some of his most iconic works include the destruction of Han dynasty vases and a photograph of him flipping his middle finger against the backdrop of Tiananmen Square (*Study of Perspective*, 1998). He was asked to work as a consultant on the design of the Bird’s Nest

Stadium for the 2008 Olympics, but he was also one of the first to call for a boycott of the games. He has paid dearly for his perseverance, especially the launch of his “Citizen Investigation” project that investigated the collapse of schools during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. His home studio was demolished due to government orders, and he was hospitalized for a brain injury as the result of police brutality. In 2011, the international media watched dumbfounded as he disappeared after being arrested at the airport in Beijing by Chinese authorities. He was later charged with economic crimes and tax evasion, and continues to be barred from leaving the country.

Han Han, on the other hand, who has never gotten into any serious trouble with authorities, is easily reduced to a teen sensation, a racecar driver with a penchant for stirring up safe trouble. Han Han himself has said, “Ai’s criticism is more direct and he is more persistent on a single issue. For me, I criticize one thing, make them feel terrible, and if they ask me to stop talking about it, then I’ll criticize something else” (Osno 2011: 59). But like Ai Weiwei who became a political provocateur after decades of being an artist, Han Han started blogging after first making a name for himself as a teen novelist with the success of his surprise hit *Triple Door*. However inane some of his non-literary antics, such as rally car racing and recording music, may seem, Han Han is nonetheless considered a significant figure in the political sphere. He was at one point China’s most popular personal blogger, drawing more than half a billion visitors to his site since its inception in 2008. In 2010, *Time* magazine selected Han Han as one of the world’s most influential people of the year, and after Ai Weiwei’s arrest in April 2011, the author Ma Jian named him as one of four dissident critics, alongside Ai Xiaoming, Dai Qing, and Cui Weiping (Ma 2011).

Unlike Han Han, whose novels are domestic bestsellers, Ai Weiwei’s art clientele

consists mainly of international buyers, a point that Ai Weiwei's critics are quick to emphasize. For example, in article published by the official daily paper *Wenhui bao*, Liu Yiheng denounced Ai Weiwei for being a "tool of the West's anti-China machinations."¹ These significant differences between the two provocateurs are certainly noteworthy, but the medium of blogging is one way of narrowing the gap between them. Both of their blogs were written primarily for a Chinese-reading audience, at least until the English translations were published in the last two years. Their greatest point of similarity is that they demonstrate the potential of the individual's ability to attract domestic and international attention online in the 21st century. Ai Weiwei has been quoted as saying that, regarding comparisons made between Han Han and Lu Xun, "Han is more influential than Lu Xun, because his writing can reach more people" (Osnos 2011: 57). Both Han Han and Ai Weiwei have established influential web presences that defy easy categorization. Han Han is a high-school dropout who is also considered an intellectual. He is a writer but also a musician, as well as a rally driver and a spokesperson for Johnnie Walker and Nestle coffee.

Like Han Han, Ai Weiwei has been both celebrated and attacked for the diversity of his professional and personal activities. Ai Weiwei's arrest in 2011 was widely publicized by international media. *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter observed about Ai Weiwei's work, a combination of sculpture, photography, performance and architecture, that it "fit no definable mode. It was his personal presence as impresario, entrepreneur and social commentator that gave it unity. And increasingly it was the critical commentary that stood out, became a form of performance art, carefully choreographed in all its moves" (Cotter, Apr. 2011). But the ability of seamlessly weaving his life into art and vice-versa has been interpreted as both a blessing and a curse. Critics have commented on how for Ai Weiwei "the line between his art and his life has

become indistinguishable” (Osnos 2010) and accused him of practicing a kind of “art that confounds the boundary between the artistic and the political; in fact, he uses it to engage in political activities” (Liu 2011). His web presence, which includes his blog and Twitter, a place where his personal life and politics meet, has also been called “his most important art so far, his magnum opus” (Cotter, Jul. 2011). This conflation, represented by recent projects such as the “So Sorry” display of backpacks that spelled out a grieving mother’s words, “She lived happily on this earth for seven years,” has been frowned upon by other critics who believe that “art and politics, seem uncomfortably mixed, to the benefit of neither” (Tinari 2010).ⁱⁱ

In this sense, Han Han has been more successful than Ai Weiwei at maneuvering among his various roles. His public persona as a modern Renaissance man for the younger crowd is even begrudgingly acknowledge by naysayers. Beijing-based cultural critic Xu Zhiyuan launched an attack on Han Han in May 2010 titled “The Triumph of Mediocrity” [Yongzhong de shengli 庸眾的勝利], but conceded first that Han Han’s appeal is undeniable: “He is a champion race car driver, a bestselling author, a rebellious guy, and an improv satirist” (Xu 2010). Xu Zhiyuan used the figurative language of monetary payment to argue that Han Han is the product of a society that requires its celebrities to dabble in a bit of everything. “You don’t have to spend any of your intelligence, there is no cost to your morality or any burden to your psyche; he is our society’s most beautiful consumer good.” Han Han may indeed be a consumer good but unlike Ai Weiwei, he possesses the uncanny ability to represent the average person, and to make what has customarily been read as the political more accessible and more ordinary.

In late December 2011, many of Han Han’s fans experienced a rude awakening when he posted a series of three blog entries titled “Speaking of revolution,” “Talking about democracy,” and “Pressing for freedom,” which called for gradual governmental reform in China rather than

drastic revolution. His essays sparked a heated online debate among media and intellectuals, and Ai Weiwei attacked him for his conservatism, saying that he had sold out to authorities. Han Renjun, Han Han's father, posted on Weibo that his son had told him he just wanted to open up the space for discussion of words that previously people had been too frightened to touch. Critics all echoed Xu Zhiyuan's complaint that Han Han had no true understanding of politics. For instance, the online personality Bei Zhicheng wrote, "He's great at delivering criticism of social problems from the average person's point of view. But he truly does lack familiarity with sociological theory and easily gets in over his head in complex issues." Journalist for the paper *Windows on the South* Xiong Peiyun agreed, "Han Han's essays aren't as bad as some critics have made them out to be, but they're also not strong enough to make him a savior. He's just a normal guy with independent thoughts. That a normal guy can become a popular idol in this country is a tragedy of this era, but it also shows that this tragic period is nearly over."ⁱⁱⁱ

All of these criticisms of Han Han emphasize his ordinariness as an attribute that makes him appealing to his fans but at the same time intellectually inferior and essentially unworthy of discussing politics on a serious level. These accusations of intellectual weakness can be explained by the rebellious move that made him famous to begin with—dropping out of the high school where he was flunking seven of his subjects. But the other facet of being a “normal guy” is that his work and persona have been integrated into the transnational capitalist economy, and as such, are subjected to market forces in China and overseas. After his famous blog entry “The disconnected nation” [Tuojie de guodu 脫節的國度], written in response to the government's poor response to the Wenzhou train crash that occurred in July 2011, was deleted by censors, Han Han did not write on his blog for a few months. On November 2, 2011, he defended his “wimpy” literary practice to readers: “I have always suffered at the hands of censorship. But

when I up my beat a little, with a bit of luck I can publish my work, and because it sells well I can sometimes manage to get the publisher's permission to be a bit more downbeat on some minor points here and there. Every time I write, I first have to engage in some self-censorship" (Barr 2012: 223). Constraints on his literary freedom are tied up with how marketable and profitable his work is, and that is largely determined by his carefully constructed image as a youth celebrity.

Making the Political Consumable

Han Han's ties to consumer culture can be traced to his initial classification with the post-80s [八零後] writers Guo Jingming, Chun Sue and Zhang Yueran. Like Guo Jingming who was born in 1983, one year after Han Han, and is best known for his youth fiction novel *City of Fantasy* (Huan cheng 幻城) inspired by Japanese fantasy, and his wildly popular series *Tiny Times* (Xiao shidai 小時代), Han Han was discovered while he was a senior in high school. The struggling literary magazine *Mengya* (萌芽), in an effort to increase circulation among high school seniors, a relatively untapped market at that point, sponsored its first New Concept Composition Competition [Xin gainian zuowen dasai 新概念作文大賽] in 1999. The writing competition was a way to find suitable authors and works for this consumer demographic, and it successfully launched the writing careers of Han Han, Guo Jingming, and Zhang Yueran in subsequent years.

The market-consciousness of post-80s literature is impossible to ignore and has long been a source of debate and criticism. In 2006, in a well-publicized online debate between the literary establishment critic Bai Ye and Han Han, the former recounted the experience of some post-80s authors being asked about the contradiction between literature and the marketplace. Much to his consternation, most of the writers feigned nonchalance: "Is there any contradiction? We don't

feel as there is any contradiction” (Bai 2006). Using Guo Jingming as an example, Bai Ye argued that “If he continues to be trapped by the market’s magical circle” [被市场的魔圈套住] it would be extremely difficult for his literary talent to ever reach its full potential. In typical fashion, Han Han produced a scathing response that argued against the category of post-80s writers, and explained that he never participated in any marketing to promote his literature: “If something is a bestseller, it’s because it’s well-written” (Han 2006). More recently, the new genre of “fast food literature” (kuaican wenxue 快餐文學), literature that is notorious for being quick and easy to read but providing little in terms of actual sustenance, has entered the literary sphere and also claimed ties to youth literature written by the post-80s writers.

Han Han’s participation in self-promotion, whether tongue-in-cheek or not, has served him well, even if it has taken place outside of literary circles like he claims. His ability to attract consumers has been recognized by retailers, and the Chinese online clothing brand Vancl (凡客) took advantage of Han Han’s everyman appeal in 2010, launching an incredibly successful ad campaign that became an instant internet meme. The ad, which shows Han Han wearing a T-shirt and looking pensive, features text that reads, “I love the internet, I love freedom, I love sleeping in, street food, racing cars. I also love cheap T-shirts sold at RMB 29, I am not the Honorary Flag Bearer, nor am I endorsing anything. I am just Han Han. I am myself, You and I, we are all Vancl Gang.” The Vancl ad campaign seems like the ultimate sign that Han Han has made the campaign for “freedom” a popular cause, one with a celebrity at its helm.

Han Han has been modest about his impact, telling an interviewer, “Maybe my writings help people vent some anger or resentment. But beyond that what use are they? This ‘influence’ is an illusion... We are just small characters beneath a spotlight on the stage” (Osno 2011: 56). But as much as Han Han insists that he feels uncomfortable acting as a representative of his

generation, he has acknowledged his ability to attract like-minded fans. For instance, in a blog about Weibo, he observed, “But what I have learned is that, through all this time, I have remained pretty much the same person I was before, and I don’t seem to have affected the people around me, who just carry on with their own concerns and interests. I don’t think it’s the case that my essays have influenced readers’ tastes: rather, they have simply been consumed by readers who share the same tastes. The result, I find, is not that people change, but that like-minded people come together in one place” (Han 2012: 228–229). The Chinese literature scholar Lydia Liu seems to agree, arguing that, “Han Han is only a mirror image of the people who like him. So in what ways will that reflection transform them? It will not...The first thing you see on his blog is not his writing but a Subaru advertisement” (Osnos 2011: 57). Implying that Han Han’s lack of effectiveness is related to his consumer affiliations, Liu believes that Han Han, like his fans, is too enmeshed in the commercialization of culture to inspire any true societal transformation. In her view Han Han’s corporate endorsements detract from his potential of being someone with the power to truly change society. But I would argue that his attachment to consumer culture is precisely what makes him influential and effective as an individual and an internet celebrity. His comfort with embracing consumer culture comes from a pragmatic view of his career, and ultimately it allows him the freedom to communicate to a wider audience.

Conclusion

Using the medium of blogs, the internet sensations Ai Weiwei and Han Han have each developed unique strategies for attracting a wide, international fan base. In the 20th century, in political mass movements, physical bodies were seen as a powerful tool to initiate action. Now, in the 21st century, the masses are often depicted as voiceless and indistinguishable. A new virtual crowd has appeared in the wake of this powerless, physical crowd: the anonymous crowd

of online supporters by way of Twitter subscribers or commentators is a mass of bodies with incredible influence, to the point that censorship continues to be a dominant mode of oppression in Chinese internet culture. In the era of these anonymous cyber-crowds, the individual can enter the international stage as a lone figure, followed by thousands of clicks of support. Internet celebrities such as Ai Weiwei and Han Han have found supporters in China and overseas by adopting strategies such as identifying with the masses, and co-opting temporary setbacks and limitations such as arrest and censorship to attract even more fans.

In early April 2011, when Ai Weiwei was seized by Chinese authorities, a blog attributed to Han Han lamented, “Ai Weiwei spoke out on behalf of petitioners; he spoke out on behalf of those harmed by melamine in milk; he spoke out on behalf of the primary school students killed in the Wenchuan Earthquake. Ai Weiwei can speak out no more. Who among us will speak out now on behalf of Ai Weiwei?” (Barmé 2011). Although question subsequently arose over whether the blog was actually written by Han Han or not,^{iv} its existence points to the position that he is projected and imagined to occupy by his loyal fans.

The Zaijian Ai Weiwei blog entry is also a fitting example of the Han Han phenomenon [Han Han xianxiang 韓寒現象] that is used to describe the public discursive space that has at this point exceeded the actual person of Han Han to encompass online debates and discussions on TV about Han Han’s love life, accusations of ghostwriting and plagiarism, all pointing to the extent at which his presence has infiltrated popular consciousness in contemporary society.

During the heyday of *Triple Door*, CCTV organized a roundtable panel of academic literary scholars to discuss the impact and reception of Han Han. At the time, Han Han appeared full of sarcasm and teenager attitude with his bangs in his eyes, scoffing when the older speakers discussed how in a few years no one would even remember who Han Han was. Even recently he

continues to be dismissed as “a rebel who does not really seek to overthrow anybody, a troublemaker who does not want to cause too much trouble.”^v But judging from the enthusiasm of his younger fans, it would be foolish to deny his influence in the literary world, the political arena, and on popular culture. Although he has received the same kind of critical acclaim that a celebrity like Ai Weiwei is internationally renowned for, Han Han’s unique brand of celebrity and politics holds enormous potential to change the way that politics and literature are discussed by the public. I have shown how looking closer at the differences between Ai Weiwei and Han Han is not misguided but actually illuminating. The multifaceted interests and activities of both celebrities have contributed to their commanding web presences, but Ai Weiwei’s blurring of art and politics is usually cast in a detrimental light, whereas Han Han’s finesse at maneuvering among his various interests has been interpreted as a strength and a testament to his more universal appeal.

The success of Han Han’s future depends on how he responds to the expectations that society places on him. In the same CCTV broadcast from 2000, the host warned Han Han prophetically as he faced an hour-long barrage of criticism from audience members and education experts, “You are a public personage now, like the American President, people will have all kinds of demands of you.”^{vi} One decade later, the newspaper *Southern Metropolis Daily* published an editorial to encourage its readers to vote for Han Han as *Time*’s most influential individuals, “How can you expect a writer or race-car driver to save you? Han Han is lonely, fighting this battle by himself. He has no shortage of worshippers. What he needs is those who will travel beside him.”^{vii} Certainly he no desire to become a kind of dissident in the vein of Liu Xiaobo, nor does he seem to have immediate plans to cultivate a fan base and audience abroad like Ai Weiwei has for his art work. As his younger readers grow old with him, it will be

interesting to see whether they continue to idolize him, and how closely he will come to achieving his literary aspirations: “I hope...to be able to write for my own pleasure...I don’t plan to suck up to anybody except my daughter. I’ll write when I want, and leave ellipses when I don’t.”^{viii}

ⁱ Translated by Geremie R. Barmé, “A View on Ai Weiwei’s Exit,” *The China Beat*, <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=3371>. Original text by Liu Yiheng, “Ai Weiwei zhen mianmu: Wu wan yishujia—wu du ju quan,” [艾未未真面目：五玩藝術家—五毒俱全] *Hong Kong Wenhui bao*, April 15, 2011, A2.

ⁱⁱ Art critic Philip Tinari writes on his blog, “This is the ‘political Ai’ of recent years, one whom he claims has always existed, but remained hidden behind eminently tasteful assemblages of clay and wood. But is spelling a sentence out of cheap (new) backpacks, even on such a massive and public scale, really the sort of gesture Ai wants to be known for? Does such direct intervention into a social conversation allow for new possibilities, or simply verify a position that has been operative, in the background, all along? Unlike some critics, I am less inclined to question the sincerity of Ai’s positions than the efficacy of this particular strategy of letting it all hang out. In contrast with the works on view inside, the façade could only seem an instance where art and politics seemed uncomfortably mixed, to the benefit of neither.”

ⁱⁱⁱ English translations provided by John Kennedy.

^{iv} Although Allan Barr, Han Han’s English translator is unsure about the origins of this blog post, Evan Osnos writes, “But this essay was a hoax; Han didn’t write it. The speed with which it circulated spoke eloquently about the power of others’ projections.” (“The Han Dynasty,” p. 59.

^v “Han on a Minute,” *The Economist*, Nov. 17, 2011.

^{vi} Translated by Evan Osnos in “Han Han Finds a New Crowd to Irritate,” *The New Yorker*, Dec. 28, 2011. Clips from the CCTV broadcast available online through YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbQwqqpimfE>.

^{vii} Translation by Osnos 2011: 56. Original editorial from “Lively Han Han, Lonely Han Han” [Re’nao Han Han, jimo Han Han 熱鬧韓寒，寂寞韓寒], *Southern Metropolis Daily*, Apr. 11, 2010.

^{viii} Han Han’s blog entry from Jan. 8, 2012 could be read as a reference to his famous post on Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel prize, when all he posted was a pair of empty quotation marks. This was interpreted by some as a cheap gimmick but by others as pointed commentary. His point is obviously that these grammatical tricks can get around censors and his fans will still be able to understand his meaning.

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